



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE POEMS OF WILLIAM H. DAVIES

There is a critical method which seeks to find the poet in the facts of his life, but it is saner and surely more fascinating to find the man in his poems. In reading the poems of Mr. William H. Davies one is struck by their revelations of character. Robust and virile, he is tender-hearted without being mawkish. His are songs of joy; and joy and beauty he finds in all healthy activities. In a graceful analysis of *Fancy* he tells us that its roots are contentment, innocence, and wonder: the three things which we find to be the prime elements in his own being. Content with the common things of day, he finds in them a perennial source of wonder, and in his joy of them he remains as innocent as a child.

There are no large perspectives in his landscapes,—no mountains, no forests, no great noisy waters; but sheep and cattle feeding, butterflies, flowers, brooks, and birds. He loves, understands, and pities the poor; pities them as only one who knows and is one with them can. That is his Christianity.

“Meanwhile he'll follow Christ the man,
In that humanity he taught,
Which to the poor and the oppressed
Gives its best time and thought.”

He would feel guilty and ashamed at having fled the misery of the city could he not console himself with the thought that he can help his fellows best only when he is light-hearted, and light-heartedness for him is not to be found in the dismal city. He is sometimes betrayed into preaching too openly; but a sermon which pleads for brotherly love is not very likely to prove offensive. In so genial a personality one might expect to find a visionary, a man full of illusions touching the innate goodness of men. That note does arise now and then, but it is offset by others of disillusionment and even cynicism:—

“Had life as many friends as Death,
Lord, how this world would shine!”

The predominant tone, however, is that of faith in men. Even when that faith is shaken, there remain an understanding

sympathy and pity. There are also moments of revolt, moments when the inequalities of society seem unjust, when the luxuriousness and callousness of the rich seem to mock the misery of the poor.

Although the poet has no children of his own, we are constantly meeting with children in Mr. Davies's poems, true children, understandingly and appreciatively presented. But perhaps nothing speaks more eloquently of his large humanity than his tender love of animals. In a poem, not otherwise memorable, he tells us of having shipped once for "fifty shillings down" with a cargo of sheep, and how—

"The first night that we were at sea
These sheep were quiet in their mind ;
The second night they cried with fear—
They smelt no pastures in the wind.

"They sniffed, poor things, for their green fields,
They cried so loud I could not sleep :
For fifty thousand shillings down
I would not sail again with sheep."

Or again, observe his reaction to "heard melodies". It is hardly what the 'average reader' expects and finds in his favorite poet; but how genuine, how convincing, how original it is!—

"I hear thy [*i.e.*, Music's] joyous cries and think of birds
Delirious when the sun doth rise in May ;
I hear thy moans and think me of poor cows
That miss at night the calves they licked by day."

One is constantly aware that Mr. Davies loves and delights in animals, not because he finds them in any way symbolical of this or that, but for themselves. I am reminded, in reading these poems, of nothing quite so often as of those calm and restful landscapes of the Dutch masters wherein we see cattle and other domestic animals serenely still or browsing. Whether I find them in the poems or not, I see, as I read, sheep grazing contentedly on a hillside, cows standing knee-deep in meadow-streams, horses gazing idly from the corner of a pasture or rubbing their noses and necks on the fence-rails. How pleasurable to meet a man who, without concerning himself too much with discovering or establishing a mystical brotherhood between

himself and the so-called lower animals, actually is their brother!
For such an one the fields are a storehouse of pure joys:—

"Say what you like,
All things love me!
I pick no flowers—
That wins the Bee.

"The Wren knows well
I rob no nest;
When I look in,
She still will rest.

"The Summer's Moths
Think my hand one—
To touch their wings—
With Wind and Sun.

"The hedge stops Cows,
Or they would come
After my voice
Right to my home.

"The garden Mouse
Comes near to play;
Indeed, he turns
His eyes away.

"The Horse can tell
Straight from my lip,
My hand could not
Hold any whip.

"Say what you like,
All things love me!
Horse, Cow, and Mouse,
Bird, Moth and Bee."

Mr. Davies is eminently a poet of birds, and preëminently the poet of butterflies. He is no indoor poet ruminating the pleasant memory of what he has observed outside. His birds are caught on the wing and his butterflies are hardly to be distinguished from the flowers. Here are butterflies which might be wind-blown petals:—

"When butterflies will make side-leaps,
As though escaped from Nature's hand
Ere perfect quite; and bees will stand
Upon their heads in fragrant deeps."

These bees, also, are very much alive and hardly to be confused with those which one keeps and observes under a glass globe. Or take this butterfly, and one is hardly likely to object to the sermon which he preaches. Even sermons can be beautiful, can be poems, when preached in this fashion:—

"Here's an example from
A Butterfly;
That on a rough, hard rock
Happy can lie;
Friendless and all alone
On this unsweetened stone.

"Now let my bed be hard,
No care take I;

I'll make my joy like this
Small Butterfly ;
Whose happy heart hath power
To make a stone a flower."

Butterflies are forever fluttering in and about these poems, simply because the poet has thrown open his heart to them and let them in. They belong to the out-of-doors, and none but an out-of-door poet can know and sing them. One more glimpse at them, and then we may pass to the poet's birds:—

"And here are butterflies: poor things
Amazed with new-created wings ;
They in the air-waves roll distressed
Like ships at sea ; and when they rest
They cannot help but ope and close
Their wings, like babies with their toes."

I never feel that Mr. Davies goes a-hunting for poems with a note-book. That is not his method. He finds, after having been out, that he has lived songs, and inevitably he sings them. A day in the fields fills his heart with the songs of blackbird, cuckoo, thrush, and even with the mute song of the grasses; and when, in the evening, he returns home he finds in his heart both the songs he has heard and one that is all his own. This man with a child's heart, who shares his bread with a robin singing in the cold, who enjoys listening to the wren as she dominates with her clear note the chatter of numberless starlings, is the man who finds April a season—

"When I can hear the small woodpeckers ring
Time on a tree for all the birds that sing ;
And hear the pleasant cuckoo, loud and long—
The simple bird that thinks two notes a song."

His understanding and love of lesser aspects of Nature are equally marked. There are beauty and song for him in flowers, grasses, the wind, the moon, and the sea. He has written but very few sea-poems, yet a single couplet from one of them is an earnest of his deep and native love of the sea:—

"I'll hear thy waves wash under my death-bed,
Thy salt is lodged forever in my blood."

Sir William Watson's *April, April* is sweet with April rain, and Swinburne's "Lisp of leaves and ripple of rain" sings of welcome

and musical rain; but they seem artful, when compared with the sweet simplicity of this:—

“I hear leaves drinking Rain;
I hear rich leaves on top
Giving the poor beneath
Drop after drop;
’Tis a sweet noise to hear
These green leaves drinking near.”

No subject is worn threadbare of poetry so long as poets can endow it with fresh beauty. I am not implying that Mr. Davies imitates, for he does not; but in *Autumn*, responding to the same sense of haze, drowsiness, fullness, and decay which moved Keats and Hood in their odes, he gives us the Autumn feeling anew:—

“Autumn is sighing for his early gold,
And in his tremble dropping his remains;
The brook talks more, as one bereft of brains,
Who singeth loud, delirious with the cold.”

How poignantly the simplest song will thrill the hearer, if the poet, too, has been deeply moved! Take, for example, that superb bit of William Allingham’s:—

“Four ducks on a pond,
A grass bank beyond,
A blue sky of spring,
White clouds on the wing;
What a little thing
To remember for years—
To remember with tears!”

A little thing, to be sure; yet, if we have hearts for it how deeply it can touch us! And here Mr. Davies gives us the same kind of thing, and with almost as stark a simplicity:—

“Know all ye sheep
And cows, that keep
On staring that I stand so long
In grass that’s wet from heavy rain—
A rainbow and a cuckoo’s song
May never come together again;
May never come this side the tomb.”

Mr. Davies is particularly delightful in his love-poems. Here, as elsewhere, he appeals by being natural, simple, spontaneous, homely, and picturesque. His love is no more a thing of the

indoors than are his birds and butterflies. It is airy, boyish, always wholesome, and the poet can speak of it with entire frankness. Now he tells of what his sweetheart means to him—and she surely means much when she overtops old books:—

“A fresher drink is in her looks
Than Nature gives me, or old books”;

now he sings the praises of her hair, roguishly stealing up behind her, pulling out a long pin, and all but drowning in the flood that is loosened and shaken about him. Again, in another poem, he warns the fairies against getting lost in the forest of his lady's hair and thanks Puck for having knotted the grass in such a way that it threw the sweet maiden into his arms. And how charming is *Love's Coming*, wherein the lady's bird, which has been silent during her absence, cocks his head as she enters, begins to sing at the sound of her voice and sings so loudly that the lovers must leave the room to hear each other speak. But nothing quite equals *My Lady Comes*, in its fanciful and original conceits, in its intrinsic beauty, and in its mingled extravaganza and sanity:—

“Peace, mournful Bee, with that
Man's deep voice from the grave :
My lady comes and flowers
Make all their colours wave ;
And joyful shivers seize
The hedges, grass, and trees.

“My Lady comes, and Leaves
Above her head clasp hands ;
The Cow stares o'er the field,
Up straight the Horse now stands ;
Under her loving eyes
Flowers change to Butterflies.

“The grass comes running up
To kiss her coming feet ;
Then cease your grumble, Bee,
When I my Lady meet ;
And Arch, let not your stones
Turn our soft sighs to groans.”

Mr. Davies's manner is no less interesting than his matter; in fact, the two are as one, for if he writes delightfully it is because he has delightful things to say. A shrewd observer, a careful

reporter of what he observes, he is always natural without being prosaic, and we never feel that his simplicity is a forced or conscious naïveté. He is fond of symbolism, as when, seeing children at play,—the boy digging in the sand for gold, the girl knitting stockings for a bird,—he thinks of the one as digging his grave, of the other as making her shroud. He is often suggestive of Herrick and the Elizabethans, as in some of the verses quoted above, or in *The Boy*, of which this is the last stanza:—

“Time is to thee
Eternity,
As to a bird
Or butterfly;
And in that faith
True joy doth lie.”

His poems are rich in quaint and delightfully surprising figures, figures wrought of keen observation and delicate fancy:—

“My lips, like gills in deep-sea homes,
Beat time, and still no music comes.”

“And gallons of sweet cider seen
On trees in apples red and green.”

A lover and singer of the little things of life, it is perhaps natural that Mr. Davies should be a poet of fancy rather than of imagination. I have spoken of a certain resemblance which he bears to Herrick. For myself, I think him an even finer poet. He is more authentic, and he is much more spontaneous. He has more to say than Herrick had, breathes a larger and a more wholesome atmosphere, is less artful, and fully as charming. If a poet is to be measured by his world, Mr. Davies will not loom very large, for his is a small world of small things; but within that world he is a master; and it may be that we should judge a man, not by the magnitude of his task, but by the manner in which he accomplishes it.

ALBERT EDMUND TROMBLY.

The University of Texas.